

Lesson 17: The Weakness of Law I

Romans 7:7-12

Invitation and Objection

⁷ What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?

Short answer

May it never be!

Long answer

The Law increases awareness of sin – personal example

- (1) On the contrary, I would not have come to **know** sin except through the Law;
(a) for I would not have **known** about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.”
(b) ⁸ But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind;
(c) for apart from the Law sin is **dead**.

The Law enlivens sin – personal example

- (2) ⁹ I was once **alive** apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became **alive** and I **died**;
(a) ¹⁰ and this commandment, which was to result in **life**, proved to result in **death** for me;
(b) ¹¹ for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it **killed** me.

Conclusion

¹² So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

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Introduction

In Romans chapter 6, Paul defends the gospel as a means to righteous living, disagreeing with his detractors that grace leads to sin. Paul argues that grace motivates and empowers for life. Paul does not stop with showing the strength of grace. He turns the argument around to show that, contrary to human religious assumption, which says, “If you do not give them Law, they will sin,” Paul argues that the Law is not all that good at producing righteousness. In chapter 7, Paul’s emphasis is on this side of his argument, the weakness of the Law. He has to be careful here. He does not want to attack the Mosaic Law. He wants to explain truth about the Law without bringing into question the goodness of God who gave the Law.

Just as we have two passages in chapter 6 defending the strength of grace, we now have two passages in chapter 7 showing the weakness of the Law. We are covering the first of those two lessons here in 7:7-12. Let’s read our passage.

[Read Romans 7:7-12]

Is the Law Sin? The Invitation objection and short answer (7:7a)

Paul follows the same rhetorical pattern he used in chapter 6. So, we start with an invitation, “What shall we say then?” And the objection, “Is the Law sin?”

Let’s clarify why that is the objection. Why is the objector asking, “Is the Law sin?”

In our last lesson we looked at the transition passage of 7:1-6. It is the bridge that moves us from considering the strength of grace to considering the weakness of Law. Using the illustration of marriage Paul argued that it is both right and good that we have moved out from under the old covenant relationship of Law and have moved into the new covenant relationship of grace. Our death to the Law in Jesus Christ justifies the move. Paul further argued that the move was necessary for the sake of righteous living. The Law has a negative effect on us. In 7:5 Paul says, “While we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”

That comment motivates the objection we have in 7:7. “What are you saying, Paul? If you are claiming that the Law stirs up sin in our hearts, what are you saying about the Law? We know what

stirs up sin in people's hearts. Sinful things stir up sin. Adult movies stir up sin. Spring break parties stir up sin. The lure of easy money stirs up sin. Are you putting the Law of Moses in that category? Is that the weakness of the Law? The Law is actually flawed, and in its flaw, it encourages our sin nature?"

It is an interesting charge. The moral and religious systems of law developed by people do tend to make concession to human desires. An obvious example is the paganism of the Roman Greek world that Paul ministered into. Worship of gods and goddesses could include temple prostitution, drunkenness, they could promote pride and rivalry. In our day, a cultural Christianity, seeking to conform to the morals of society, makes moral compromises in its moral code, redefining the moral law of the Bible. That compromise promotes sin. So, what is encouraged as good is not actually good.

Is that the weakness of the Law? Is Paul saying the Law of Moses is morally compromised? If the Law stirs up sin, then isn't Paul saying the Law itself, in some way, is sinful?

In the middle of verse 7, Paul gives us his short answer to this charge that the Law of Moses is sinful. He writes, "May it never be!" It is his classic short answer. He outright rejects the idea.

Paul is not saying the Law itself is sin. He is saying that what is not sin, the Law, interacts with sinful human nature to stir up sin. He is going to explain this in his long answer in 7b-12. In these verses he makes two main assertions. First, he argues that the Law increases awareness of sin and second, that the Law enlivens sin. We are going to look at both in turn.

But also, notice the slight change in Paul's rhetorical pattern here at the start of his long answer. Three times he has used the phrase, "Do you not know..." to introduce a longer answer to an objection. And here in 7:7 we still have the verb "know" in the introduction, but it is not put forth in a question, and it is not put to the reader as "you know" but is rather a statement from the author. He says, "I would not have come to know." This switch to the first-person pronoun "I" goes along with a change in the type of illustration that Paul is going to give. In the earlier three examples, we had the illustrations of baptism, slavery, and marriage. In 7:7-12 the illustration is presented as Paul's personal experience. So, we will also need to keep that in mind as we observe the text.

Let's start with the first assertion that Paul makes in 7:7b-9. The Law increases knowledge or awareness of sin.

I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. The Long Answer (7b-12)

[Read Romans 7b-9]

(1) The Law increases awareness of sin. (7b-9)

Paul states that "he would not have come to know sin" without the help of the Law. Then he makes three separate points.

(a) First, he restates that main point in a way that moves from the general observation to a more specific case. He said he "would not have come to know sin except through the Law." Now he takes the 10th Commandment to make his case more specific, using the case of coveting, which is to desire what is not rightly his.

He is not going to give away why he chose the specific sin of coveting as his example. Though if you are going to choose one of the 10 Commandments, this is an interesting one to choose because it is the only one that forbids an internal desire, rather than an outward action. And it could be argued that the sin of coveting is one of the primary motivating sources for the other sins. "Do not murder;" "Do not commit adultery;" "Do not steal;" are all outward actions. They are all on the extreme end of the sin continuum of thought, word and deed. These are the extreme deeds of sin. The sin of coveting, once fully formed in the human heart, has the power to move a person to murder, to adultery, to theft. Paul's choice of examples both takes us to the 10 Commandments, the core summary of the Mosaic Law, and takes us inside the human heart to the struggle of human desire. The struggle of coveting.

(b) Paul next points out in verse 8 that sin responds to the command against coveting by coveting. "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind."

I want to think about Paul's words more precisely in a moment. His example raises a number of questions that are hard to answer. But in looking to the details, I do not want to miss the most direct and simple point being made by Paul. Paul is simply affirming a truth that every caretaker of a pre-school child recognizes. If you want to create the desire in a child to act in a certain way, simply tell the child that they are not allowed to do it. Reverse psychology depends on a negative internal reaction to Law. We don't want to do what we are told to do. Of course, we wise up pretty quickly to reverse psychology. But the internal reaction to Law remains as a basic principle of human nature.

Let's say you have a nice grassy Lawn outside your school or outside your office. You walk by it every day. You have never walked across the grass or sat on it to eat your lunch. You never thought about it. You simply walk by. Then one day coming out of your building, you turn to walk by and notice a new sign on the Lawn which reads, "Keep off the grass." As you read that sign, what is the first desire of your heart?

I can take a guess. My guess is that your first desire would be to walk over and step your foot onto the grass. What we cannot do becomes more desirable simply by being told we cannot do it. Human nature responds adversely to moral law.

We want to have what we are told we cannot have. We want to do what we are told we cannot do. That's the simple general point being made here about human nature. Law increases our awareness of sin by confronting our nature with specific moral definition and authority, which then creates a response against that Law. If we are able to honestly and accurately assess our inner response, we see that the Law of life draws out an opposing response of death.

We have talked about how Jesus challenges our claim to goodness in the sermon on the mount. It is not unusual for a person to claim to be basically decent by saying, "You know, I have never committed murder or adultery or theft."

"Really?" Jesus teaches us that these things are the extreme actions on a continuum. To have never murdered is also to never hit, to never torn down with your words, to never thought hateful thoughts of another person. Are you really so good that you have never done these things?

Paul is taking this a step further. He is saying that it is not only a problem with moral education. In the sermon on the mount Jesus gives us a higher understanding of morality. Paul tells us that the lack of education is not our problem. The more we understand the actual requirements of moral law, the more we understand what we ought not do, the more we want to do that which we ought not do. I have latent desires in me that I have never considered. And the Law brings out those desires.

Not only do I have latent desires for things that are immoral. I also have a basic desire to define for myself what I can and cannot do. My nature resists moral law that comes from outside me. The more you tell me I cannot do, the more I become aware that I want to do what I am told I cannot do. The more defined the Law is, like the Mosaic Law, for example, the better equipped that Law is to bring out the rebellion in my soul.

There are ways out of this. I can reject the moral law. I can call the Bible a flawed human document bound by its own culture. And then, I can go command by command to redefine moral law. By defining the Bible as relative, I remove its authority over me. I am the judge of which moral commands apply and which do not apply. That relieves some of the pressure coming from inside of me. I am no longer disobedient to moral authority, because I am the moral authority.

Another way to remove the tension that moral law creates in my soul is to reject the Lawgiver. If I claim that God cannot be known or that God does not communicate or that God does not exist, then I free myself from confrontation with any moral standard.

Another way is to acknowledge God above but keep him at a distance. Religious ceremony can be very helpful with this. I go to church, I say my prayers, I follow the ritual. And I keep my head down. I

live out my life as best I can, trying not to call attention to myself. It's also helpful if I do not go in much for internal reflection. Just live and let live.

However we do it, by removing or lessening moral law, we can feel better about our own condition. The less we try to live according to a standard, the easier it is to convince ourselves we meet the standard. We still share in the experience Paul describes, but we can be quick to discount it, or stuff it down or shove it aside.

But if I truly try to follow God's moral law according to his moral definition, including thought, word and deed, the more I try, the more I will be confronted by the struggle within.

Paul indicated this purpose of Law back in 3:20. He stated, "through the Law comes knowledge of sin." Here he is telling us that it is not only the educational quality of Law that makes us aware of sin. Being faced with Law triggers sin in us, and so, makes us aware of the sin within through our own experience. We know we are sinful because of how our heart responds to moral law.

(c) Paul's third point about the awareness of sin emphasizes this truth that the Law interacts in way with human nature to bring about an experiential awareness of sin. He says in 8a, "for apart from Law sin is dead."

Sin lies dormant like a snake in cold weather. The Law is a stick. When poked the snake is stirred to life.

(2) The Law enlivens sin. (7:9-11)

This moves us into the second main assertion about the Law. The first is that the Law increases awareness of sin. The second is that the Law enlivens sin or brings sin to life. As I just said, Law does not make us aware of sin simply by teaching us. Law makes us aware of sin by reacting with our fleshly nature in such a way as to enliven the rebellion in our soul. This assertion comes in 9-11.

[Read Romans 9-11]

The specifics are going to be a little more challenging to interpret. What does Paul mean that he was "alive apart from Law"? We will get to that. But like with the first assertion, I think there is a fairly straightforward idea here about sin that we can identify.

Paul claims in verse 9 that without the Law he was alive. When the commandment came sin was enlivened. The result is that Paul died. He then makes two specific points about this assertion.

(a) The first specific point in verse 10. And it states that the design of moral law was to provide life for the one who would live by it. The commands of Mosaic Law are lifegiving commands. We are not talking about a flawed moral Law. We are talking about a moral law that will protect human beings from damaging and destructive actions and require human beings to act in such a way that provides positive life experiences. Ironically, this Law that is designed to protect and provide ends up resulting in death.

(b) The second specific point in verse 11 identifies sin as the problem. Paul repeats the same language from verse 8. "Sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me." The culprit is not the Law. The culprit is sin. It is sin responding to the commandment.

We might wonder whether or not human beings are morally neutral. It is like looking at a flask of clear liquid in a chemistry experiment. Is the liquid good? Is it bad? Is it healthy? Is it toxic? It is tough to tell by sight. We need a catalyzing agent to drop into the clear liquid to let us know what we are dealing with. Drop a catalyst into heroine and it turns purple. Moral law serves as a catalyst for the human soul. It makes evident the sin within. We are faced with a Law that is good. But the desire of sin tells us the opposite is good. It deceives us. When we act on those desires we turn from God and experience the consequences of our actions. We experience death as our souls die to God, as our lives play out as a physical husk separated from the life of God within, and ultimately through physical death and eternal separation from God. Sin has won. It has deceived, and it has killed.

(3) Conclusion: the Law is holy. (7:12)

Paul concludes in verse 12 with his view of the Law. “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

Back to where we began. Paul’s opponents heard him say in the earlier passage that the Law arouses sinful passions. They then suggest that Paul is calling the Law sin. Paul argues here that the Law is not sin. The Law is holy, righteous and good. The problem is with fallen human nature. The Law serves as a catalyst which induces rebellious desire. So, though the Law was designed to provide and protect human beings, the sin nature of human beings interacts with moral law in such a way that we sin even more. This catalyzing effect that Law has when applied to sinful human nature brings to life the sin within, making us more aware of our sin.

That I think is the simple point of this passage. Law, though good, brings out the sin within.

Whose experience is this?

Now we need to consider the challenge this passage presents to interpretation. Looking at some of the details of the passage, interpreters struggle to understand whether Paul is really talking about himself or whether he is using the first person to talk about someone else.

Paul:

For example, Paul says in verse 8 that he would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.” When did Paul not know about coveting? He was a Jewish boy. And he was taught at home by Jewish parents. He was taught in school by Jewish Rabbis. How old would he be before he learned the 10 Commandments? 5 years old? 7 years old? 3 years old? We don’t know, but we have to guess it was pretty young.

Also, what does he mean by saying in verse 9 he was “once alive apart from Law?” When was little Paul ever apart from Law? And what does he mean by saying he was alive apart from Law? He argued in chapter 5 that from the time of Adam to Moses and beyond that all sin and all experience the consequence of sin. Do we need to assume an age of accountability in order to understand what Paul is saying? Is he suggesting that he was innocent until he could comprehend Law? What age would that be? And why does he not explain that more clearly?

Historic Adam:

Some scholars have noticed potential historic allusions in the text. At first, verse 9 seems to fit with Adam’s experience. “I once was alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died.” The reference to deception also makes us think of Adam and Eve being deceived to eat. It is not a perfect allusion though. Adam was alive apart from Law. But sin did not come alive in Adam until after he broke the commandment. Adam and Eve are the two people for whom it does not seem right to ascribe sin as the internal motive.

Historic Israel:

Some have noticed an allusion to Israel. Saved out of Egypt, Israel received the Law at Mount Sinai and quickly broke that Law. Then God’s anger burned against Israel. He stated his desire to wipe them from the book of life, though instead showed them mercy. Is the idea that Israel did not sin as Adam did by breaking specific commands, but when the Law was given at Mount Sinai sin came to life? I think an allusion to Israel fits even less than an allusion to Adam.

I am willing to recognize the possibility of some historic reference to Adam or Israel in Paul’s choice of language. But if it is there intentionally, I think it is in the background only. Thinking on the sin of Adam and of Cain and of David and of Israel, they all enrich the experience Paul is talking about. But none fit really well with the experience he described.

Everyman:

I like Douglas Moo’s interpretation that Paul is speaking about Law and sin from his own personal experience. He has felt what he describes. But he has framed the experience in a way that matches

general human experience. Moo calls it the experience of Everyman. And I like that. I think that fits with Paul's language.

That Paul is speaking somewhat metaphorically is clear. He continues to personify sin as he did in chapter six. He speaks about sin as though it has a life of its own. He makes sin the culprit. It is sin that took the opportunity afforded by the commandment. It is a literary way of describing the internal struggle of the mind and soul that goes on in a person.

Paul's use of alive and dead are also metaphoric. How is sin dead or alive. And how is Paul dead while still alive. Paul's language is almost the language of poetry though he is clearly using prose argumentation. I am not saying that it really is poetry. But I am reminded of poetry by the effort Paul is making to describe human experience. Calling sin dead describes our lack of awareness or struggle with sin. It is the dormant snake within. We go through some days feeling pretty good about ourselves without any apparent moral struggle. Sin seems dead. On other days, the struggle is miserable. We desire, and we resist. We desire, and we give in. We feel sin alive in us.

I think that Paul has framed this passage in the first person to bring us into the realm of personal experience. It is experience that Paul is aware of himself. Yet, he also uses more general language that cannot be attributed to a specific time or event in Paul's life. By using this more general language he describes the experience of Everyman.

I also think that Paul's specific focus on Mosaic Law does not limit his argument to Mosaic Law. Mosaic Law is the highest form of Law that we might encounter because Mosaic Law was communicated by God through Moses. Christians and Jews recognize Mosaic Law as Bible, as the very word of God. If the Mosaic Law is weak in this way, then all Law is weak in this way. While the principle Paul argues here is made specifically in regard to Mosaic Law, I believe it is to be understood as a broader principle. Genuine moral law has this effect on people, whatever the source. It is a problem for all religions and for all moral authorities. People do not like to be held morally accountable. The sin within Everyman resists.

The Broccoli Illustration

However we understand the specifics of the experience Paul describes, we have to come back to the main question he is answering and to the conclusion he draws. Paul is answering the objection that his perspective makes the Law out to be sin. Paul, says, "By no means. It does not make the Law out to be sin." His point is simple. The Law is good, holy and righteous, meant to produce life. But because of fallen human nature, when human beings are exposed to righteous moral command that command serves as a catalyst to stir up sin. We become aware of sin in our souls by the natural rebellious response in our hearts. The Law is not sin. It is sin that takes opportunity through the commandment to bring about death.

I'd like to end with an experience that came to me as a Dad that affirmed to me the teaching that we are not born morally neutral. In our family it is known as the broccoli example. I asked Julia's permission to share it with you.

Julia was about a year old. I know because we were still living in Zagreb at the time. She was a sweet, sweet baby, observing the world with big blue eyes. She smiled easily and often. She went to sleep without a fuss. The perfect little girl.

Sitting in her high chair, I was watching over her as she ate her dinner. And she knocked her broccoli off her tray onto the floor. You know, no big deal. I put it back and said, "Julia, don't play with your broccoli." She knocked it off again. I said, "Julia, don't do that again." She knocked it off again. "Julia, if you knock your broccoli on the floor one more time, I am going to have to give you a spank, spank on your hand." I put the broccoli back. And at that moment Julia's face turned very serious. She picked up a piece of broccoli, slowly held it out over the floor, and with her big blue eyes staring right into mine, she let it drop."

It was the clearest example of defiance I had ever experienced in my life. My sweet little girl. The Law came from me and sin, taking the opportunity through the commandment, deceived her.

This is our universal experience as fallen human beings. The Law is intended to produce life but because of our sin nature, the Law stirs up desires of death. Moral law, though good, righteous and holy, is not enough to bring about life within fallen human beings. It can help curb a number of outward symptoms. But our internal problem is at a critical level. Moral law reveals sin without effecting essential internal transformation. We need more than the health regimen that is moral law. We need heart surgery and that only comes through the covenant of grace.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 7:7-12?

What are some questions that the text raises for you?

2. Paul concluded in 7:1-6 that it is better for us to move from the covenant of Law to the covenant of Grace because of a problem with the covenant of Law. He said that Law arouses or stirs up sin in us. That could result either (1) from a problem with the law – the law is flawed, the law is sin or (2) from a problem in us. Paul concludes that the problem is not in the law but in our fallen human nature. The problem is sin within.

That does not mean that the question was not a good question. It is possible for moral law to be flawed. Consider these two questions”

(a) What are some commands in the Mosaic Law that people today might call immoral or sinful?

(b) What are some moral ideas promoted in your culture (the religious culture, Christian culture, or secular culture) that you might consider immoral or sinful?

3. What are one or two examples from your personal experience that help you identify with Paul’s main point that when people are confronted with moral law, their fallen human nature resists? When have you experienced this?

4. Paul’s argument does not require that we resist obedience to a moral command every single time a moral obligation is put on us. There are times that we are quite willing to go along with a moral command. Why do you think a person is more likely to obey than to resist a moral command? Is it personality? Is it upbringing? Is it what they hope to get out of it? Is it something else?